

Daily Herald, July 18, 2005

It was late, but well-deserved: a Purple Heart awarded to the family of a deceased World War II pilot from Lake County who was injured during a bombing raid.

Decades later, the family of First Lt. Ward Smith stood proud Saturday as Congressman Mark Kirk bestowed the award. Smith, an Army Air Corps co-pilot, did not receive it at the time because he was injured by shards of glass rather than metal (at the time, a prerequisite).

Kirk presented the Purple Heart to Smith's family during a ceremony at the Waukegan Airport.

"It was only right that we have righted this wrong," Kirk said about the soldier's bravery on Sept. 27, 1944, in the European Theater. "It is vitally important because these men saved the world, and their mission was incredibly dangerous."

After Smith's squadron dropped bombs near Kassel, Germany, more than 100 German fighters attacked the 35 planes. The windshield of Smith's B-24 Liberator, "The Sweetest Rose of Texas," was shattered and shards of glass penetrated his forehead and face.

Smith and his pilot, Lt. Colonel Paul Swofford, managed to fly the damaged plane to their base in Tibenham, England. Only three other planes returned.

Smith's son, Hugh Smith, accepted the award on behalf of his dad, who died in 1987. Smith's widow, Helen Smith, lives with her daughter, Robin Snow, in Libertyville.

"So many young men, both from Germany and America, never returned home. My dad felt grateful and very lucky to have survived," Hugh Smith said.

The ceremony took place in front of the B-24 Liberator known as Diamond Lil, one of only two B-24s still flying. The Commemorative Air Force of Midland, Texas, owns the plane and tours the country to raise money for its upkeep.

The plane will be on display from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. today at the airport, located at Yorkhouse and McAree roads in Waukegan. Rides will be available, starting at 11 a.m. The cost is \$400.